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ABSTRACT

This monograph describes the experience of Israeli curriculum developers as they wrote textbooks of regional geography for the primary and junior high school levels. There are three parts to the paper. Part I discusses the reform of the geography curriculum in Israeli schools in the 1960s. The new curriculum emphasized three areas: geography of Israel; world regional geography; and systematic geography. The content of regional geography was seen as the most important with roughly one-half of the total instructional hours available allocated to it. Part II of the paper deals with considerations in writing textbooks for regional geography. Any given region may be approached from one of a number of viewpoints. For example, one may approach a region through an analysis of a number of major problems or through an analysis of its central area as compared with its margin. The content of the text can also be achieved through a variety of techniques. For example, one text might consist of reading matter and a second of exercises. The third part of the paper describes how the Israeli team wrote one book dealing with the regional geography of West Africa taking into consideration all the issues described above. The major lessons drawn from their experience are: 1) in order to cover a large number of topics rather than the in depth study of one topic, one must be able to prioritize; 2) the most important material--in this case principles of systematic and regional geography--should be introduced into the text in a hidden manner; and 3) the best format is a text constructed of a combination of reading material, illustrative matter, and exercises with each supporting the other. (Author/RM)

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WRITING TEXTBOOKS OF REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY: AN ISRAELI EXPERIENCE

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I. The Geography Curriculum in Israeli Schools

In the 1960s the Israeli educational system underwent a reform. In order to achieve a number of educational and national goals this reform introduced organizational changes including a change in the division of the twelve years of education into a six-year primary school, a three-year junior-high school, and a three-year high-school. These changes were complemented by curriculum reforms based on changes in both content and underlying educational principles.

In geography, as in other disciplines, a governmental committee was established to prepare a new comprehensive curriculum. The curriculum focused its attention on the study of geography in the primary and junior-high schools.

Two major concepts were adopted by the committee:

A. The curriculum must present a wide range of geographical phenomena, and emphasize the relations between these phenomena.

B. The curriculum must give particular stress to the interaction between man and his natural environment as a consequence of factors introduced by the activities of human society.

The goal of the new curriculum was to be achieved through the study of a variety of topics, topics which may be categorized under three headings: Geography of Israel, World Regional Geography, and Systematic Geography. The content of regional geography was seen as the most important means of transmitting geographical ideas at this stage of the educational process, with roughly one-half of the total instructional hours available allocated to it.

II. Considerations in Writing Textbooks for Regional Geography

The dominant viewpoint in regional geography has shifted in recent years. Any given region may be approached from one of a number of viewpoints, depending on one's perception of regions. For example, one may approach a region through an

analysis of a number of major problems: alternatively, one may approach the same region through an analysis of its central area as compared with its margin. Each textbook writer attempts to represent his own regional viewpoint by means of the topics taught in the text.

The representation of this regional view-point -- the content of the textbook -- is achieved through a variety of techniques, in accordance with the aims of the book, and these techniques constitute the method of the book. Two books bearing the same title could exemplify two completely different methods. One might contain only exercises, while the other is constructed as a source of reading matter, conveying information without any exercises at all.

A writing team was formed at the University of Haifa in order to write textbooks for geography, and this team undertook the writing of a number of textbooks, covering such regions as West Africa, The Middle East, Mediterranean Lands, and South America. Each of these books was approached through the following stages:

1. Writing the first draft, internal criticism by the team.

2. Internal criticism of method, with additional corrections.
3. Initial field-test of an experimental edition.
4. Correction of the experimental edition. Second field-test, final corrections and publication of the commercial edition.

Although the procedure outlined above was relatively slow, the testing and criticism permitted adaptation of the methods employed in the books to a wide range of pupil populations. Let us choose one book which has gone through all the steps outlined above, and enjoyed considerable success - the book dealing with West Africa.

III. West Africa - A Regional Approach and Methods

One of the area's important characteristics -- a key to the understanding of other phenomena -- is its climatic belts, with a transition from equitorial forests to the dry lands in the north. Speaking generally, the area is typified by homogeneous climate within each belt, with a gradual transition from belt to belt -- all this occurring in an area whose landscape is largely uniform, without abrupt changes in topography. A graphic representation of these homogeneous climatic belts

produces a series of bands whose general direction is east-west. On the other hand, a political map of the same region emphasizes the breaking up of this pattern of east-west bands, with borders cutting across them in a north-south direction. This produces an interesting regional contradiction, the role of those natural phenomena produces homogeneity within the region, while those phenomena connected with human action lead to heterogeneity. The two types of phenomena work at cross-purposes and perpendicular directions, producing the Crossword of West Africa. This Crossword owes its existence to a modern historical process, the penetration of Europeans into the region. This also led to several other regional processes - urbanization, economic development, westernization of culture, changes in technology, and others.

The major problem facing the writing team was the problem of translating regional knowledge into a textbook that would be attractive, interesting, and worthwhile educationally. With the knowledge that children of this age (11-12) are drawn to historical adventures, in particular adventures involving children, it was decided to adopt a method that would permit the textbooks to exploit this characteristic. The text opens with a historical adventure, Mungo Park's attempt

to trace the course of the Niger. The book described his journey through a series of imaginary letters written by one of the members of Park's expedition. As the book continues there are also letters sent home by Israeli children who are visiting West Africa now. The letters provide a good tool for describing various phenomena of the region. The contrast between the letters dealing with historical and current events, and between the letters and the geographic data on the region, promotes suspense and interest on the part of the learner.

Maps and drawings of the region are interwoven with photographs. The pupils are led to study and analysis of problems and processes of the West African region by means of questions distributed through the text. The methodological devices facilitate learning of both the principles underlying the regional phenomena and of geographic skills, such as analysis of maps, graphic design and analysis of illustrations.

IV. Summary

In conclusion let us attempt to list the major lessons which may be drawn from our experience.

1. The governmental committee program's preference for coverage of a large number of topics rather than study.in depth

and development of skills through consideration of a limited number of topics. Accordingly, one must begin by establishing priorities within a given topic, and to be prepared to leave untaught a proportion of the material in order to permit concentration on important topics.

2. The most important material -- principles of systematic and regional geography -- should be introduced into the text in a hidden manner. One must hope that the pupil will grasp the fact that the material presented in the text represents no more than a selection from a wealth of existing phenomena; this understanding may be encouraged by leading the pupil to consideration of additional instances, to which he must bring to bear lessons he has previously learned.

3. From the wide range of methods which are available for presentation of material, one must choose those which can best cope with the wide range of conditions which are met in the classroom. Books which are constructed as a combination of reading material, illustrative matter, and exercises, with each supporting the other and with one leading the pupil to the next, provide, in our view, the best solution to the problems created by this great diversity of conditions.